

A Chronological Note on the First Persian Campaign of Heraclius (622)

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The main sources concerning Heraclius' first campaign against the Persians are: (a) The poem of George Pisides, known under the Latin title *Expediatio Persica*;¹ Pisides, an eyewitness, composed and read his panegyric poem shortly after the end of the campaign, when the emperor returned to Constantinople.² (b) A chapter of the Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor (†818) concerning the events of the year 622;³ the first part of this chapter, concerning the preparations and the beginning of the campaign (p. 302, l. 32–p. 303, l. 17) is based on sources that have not been preserved; the second part (p. 303, l. 17–p. 306, l. 8) depends almost completely upon the poem of Pisides.⁴ Of the

1. Ed. with Italian translation and important commentary by A. Pertusi, *Giorgio di Pisidia, Poemi, I: Panegirici Epici (Studia Patristica et Byzantina, 7: Ettal, 1959)*, pp. 84–136 (text and transl.), pp. 136–75 (commentary). In the following, we use the abbreviations: *Pisides* in order to refer to the text; and *Pertusi* in order to refer to the commentary.

2. Pertusi, p. 15; L. Sternbach, *Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności, Wydział Filologiczny*, 2nd Ser., XV (Krakow, 1900), 295–6.

3. *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, I (Leipzig, 1883), pp. 302, l. 32–306, l. 8 (in the following referred to as *Theophanes*).

4. In the margins of his edition of Theophanes De Boor has given references to the corresponding lines of Pisides. A very close comparison of the two texts shows that Theophanes has followed Pisides so closely, that he eventually repeats himself; e.g., the army manoeuvres organized by Heraclius before the beginning of the operations, are described twice: on p. 303, ll. 12–17, following Theophanes' unknown source, and on p. 304, ll. 3–11, following Pisides. The important elements of information concerning the campaign itself, ignored by Pisides and provided by Theophanes, are: the name of the

other Greek sources, the Paschal Chronicle and the Chronicle of Patriarch Nicephorus do not even mention the campaign, while later chroniclers, such as Cedrenus and Zonaras, summarize and reproduce the account of Theophanes. The non-Greek chronicles have also a very limited importance for our research since most of them ignore this first campaign, or contain no chronological data.

The campaign of 622 has been studied by E. Gerland,⁵ A. Pernice,⁶ Ju. Kulakovskij,⁷ and mainly by N. H. Baynes,⁸ whose conclusions have been followed by modern historians.⁹ Very important is also A. Pertusi's historical commentary to *Expositio Persica*.

Heraclius left Constantinople by boat on 5 April 622 and arrived at Bithynian Pylai (probably Gömlek, in the gulf of Izmit) the next day.¹⁰ From there he marched to the interior of Asia Minor, to 'the regions of the themes' according to Theophanes,¹¹ where he started grouping his army which was in its winter quarters and dispersed; he added to it new recruits

Persian general Shahrbaraz, Σάρβαρος, to whom Pisides ironically refers as ὁ βάρβαρος (cf. E. Gerland, in *BZ*, III (1894), 347, n. 1); the geographical precision that the military operations started when Heraclius arrived in 'the region of Armenia' (ἐν τῇ μέρῃ τῆς Ἀρμενίας: Theophanes, p. 304, l. 13); and the indication that the Byzantine army went to winter quarters in Armenia (ἐς Ἀρμενίαν: p. 306, l. 8); but Armenia is mentioned by Pisides in a similar context (II, l. 345, cf. Theophanes, p. 304, l. 25).

5. 'Die persischen Feldzüge des Kaisers Herakleios', *BZ*, III (1894), 340–8.

6. *L'imperatore Eraclio* (Firenze, 1905), pp. 111–20.

7. *Istoriia Vizantii*, III (Kiev, 1915), pp. 57f.

8. 'The First Campaign of Heraclius against Persia', *English Historical Review*, XIX (1904), 694–702; and again in *Cambridge Medieval History*, II (1913), pp. 292–3; concerning the problem of chronology see also *BZ*, XXVI (1926), 55ff.

9. G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 100–1. Ja. A. Manandjan, 'Maršruty persidskikh pohodov imperatora Iraklija', *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, III (1950), 133–53, barely mentions this first campaign on p. 134. On the contrary, a very detailed description of the campaign is given by A. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Amsterdam, 1968), pp. 135–44.

10. Dates: Theophanes, p. 302, ll. 32–4; cf. Pisides II, ll. 10–11.

11. Theophanes, p. 303, ll. 10–11. I have commented on the meaning of this controversial phrase in an article to appear in *Zbornik Radova Viz. Inst.*, XV, under the title 'Les premières mentions des thèmes dans la chronique de Théophane'.

and organized drills and manœuvres.¹² The Persian army, under the command of General Shahrbaraz, was not far away. The Byzantines feared its intervention before the concentration of all their troops;¹³ but nothing of the kind occurred. They arrived in 'Armenia'¹⁴ and for the first time they made contact with enemy forces: it was a minor clash of a patrol with a band of Arabs, allies of the Persians.¹⁵

At this point of the account, we find in Pisides five lines of text which are crucial for the whole chronology and geography of the campaign. Theophanes has misinterpreted these lines and led the modern historians into error. Pisides' text reads as follows:

*Ἐπεὶ γάρ, εἰς χειμῶνα πρὸς τὸ Πόντιον
κλίμα διατρίψας, συντόμως ὁ βάρβαρος
τὰς εἰσβολὰς κατέσχε τῆς ὁδοῦ φθάσας
ὁ δὲ στρατός σου δυσχερεῖς τὰς εἰσβάσεις
ἅπαξ προληφθεὶς εἶχε τὰς πρὸς ἡλίον . . .*¹⁶

The meaning is to me obvious: 'after having spent the winter (i.e. 621–2) in the region of Pontus, the barbarian (i.e. Shahrbaraz) moved quickly and managed to occupy the access of the road; your army (i.e. Heraclius') had difficulty entering the way leading to the east, since the enemy had moved first . . .'. But the corresponding text of Theophanes the Confessor gives a quite different account:

*Ἐπεὶ δὲ χειμῶν κατέλαβεν, ἀποκλίνας ὁ βασιλεὺς <πρὸς> τὸ Πόντιον κλίμα, ἔδοξε τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐν τούτῳ αὐτὸν παραχειμάζοντα <πολιορκεῖν>.*¹⁷

According to Theophanes, 'when the winter (622–3) arrived,

12. Pisides II, ll. 38, 54, 56, 76–205; Theophanes, p. 303, ll. 24f. It must be remembered here that in 621 Heraclius, after concluding peace with the Avars, had transferred to Asia Minor his European troops, obviously in view of the campaign that he planned for 622: Theophanes, p. 302, ll. 28–30.

13. Pisides II, ll. 57–9.

14. According to Theophanes, p. 304, l. 13.

15. Pisides II, ll. 206–38; Theophanes, p. 304, ll. 13–18 (summary incomplete).

16. Pisides II, ll. 256–60. I have added commas after γάρ (l. 256) and διατρίψας (l. 257).

17. Theophanes, p. 304, ll. 18–20.

Heraclius moved to the Pontus, and the barbarians decided to besiege him in his winter quarters'. But the Confessor's text is significantly corrupt in this point; and we know that he is summarizing the text of Pisides. His misinterpretation may be due to an error in the manuscript of the poem that he used.¹⁸ But modern scholars, preferring the easy text of the chronicle to the complicated verse of Pisides, have tried to understand the latter through the Confessor's summary.¹⁹ As a result, the chronology of the campaign has suffered, as all the subsequent operations have been dated in the winter 622–3 while our only primary source, Pisides, states clearly that they happened in the summer of 622.²⁰

So, according to Pisides, the Persian army, after having spent the winter 621–2 in the region of Pontus, managed to occupy the passes, thus blocking Heraclius' advance to the east. With a stratagem, the Byzantine emperor and his army managed to outflank them with such success that it took the Persians six days²¹ to realize that Heraclius was in their rear, holding strong positions and able to cut their communications with Persia. In his turn, Shahrbaraz attempted to outflank his opponents by passing through the Cilician Gates.²² But, realizing that Heraclius had the opportunity thereby to invade Persia passing through Armenia,²³ the Persian general changed his mind, returned and started following the Byzantine army with the hope of attacking it by surprise at night.

This project failed because on the night of the attack there was a full moon; moreover a moon-eclipse occurred that same night

18. E.g., διέτριψας instead of διατρίψας (in Pisides II, l. 257). It is significant that the correction of διατρίψας into διέτριψας has already been proposed by Tafel, in order to reconcile Pisides' and Theophanes' versions of the events: G. L. F. Tafel, *Theophanis Chronographia; Probe einer Neuen kritisch-exegetischen Ausgabe* (Vienna, 1852), p. 55, n. 11 (offprint of the *Sitzungsberichte der philol.—histor. Classe der kaiserl. Akademie d. Wiss.* IX, 1852).

19. See, e.g., the considerations of Baynes, *English Historical Review*, loc. cit., p. 697 and n. 29. Pertusi's translation (p. 109), although much better than any previous one, also suggests that the events that follow were in the winter 622–3.

20. Later in his text, Pisides describes the Byzantine army as suffering from the 'hot sun' (Pisides III, l. 100), which is hardly possible in winter.

21. Pisides II, ll. 286–8.

22. Pisides II, ll. 340–3; cf. Theophanes, p. 304, l. 24 (different interpretation of the Persian move).

23. Pisides II, l. 345; Theophanes, p. 304, l. 25.

and discouraged the Persians.²⁴ We have here a chronological indication of great accuracy: this eclipse can hardly be any other than the one of 28 July 622;²⁵ this is the precise date of the unsuccessful Persian surprise attack.

In the following lines, Pisides provides us with valuable information concerning the whole chronology of the campaign. One passage, where the poet addresses Heraclius, shows that fifteen days had passed since the very beginning of the military operations:

*Ἦδη δὲ πολλῶν ἐν μέσῳ κινουμένων
τρεῖς πεντάριθμοι λοιπὸν ἦσαν ἡμέραι
ἐν αἷς ἀπαύστως εἰς ἀγῶνας ἐκτρέχων
πρὸς τὰς παρατάξεις τὸν στρατὸν συνεκρότεις.*²⁶

Consequently, the two armies must have met in the passes on 13 July or shortly thereafter; the first clash occurred, Heraclius succeeded in outflanking his opponents and it took the Persians six days to realize what had happened—this takes us down to 19 July or after it. Between that date and 28 July, one must place the march of the Persians towards the Cilician Gates and their return and new contact with the Byzantines.

Another passage of Pisides concerns the chronology of the events that are subsequently described by the poet. Speaking of the moon, he declares:

*οἶμαι δέ, χαίρει Περσικῆς βλάβης χάριν
φθίνουσα καὶ λήγουσα καὶ μειουμένη.
ἀεὶ γὰρ αὐτοῖς μᾶλλον ἐκλείπειν θέλει
ἥπερ προλάμπειν δυσσεβῶς τιμωμένη.*²⁷

It is obvious that the words *φθίνουσα*, *λήγουσα* and *μειουμένη* are used to describe the constant decrease of the moon during the second part of the lunar month. And I understand this as a

24. Pisides II, ll. 368–75; III, ll. 1–2; Theophanes, p. 305, ll. 2–4.

25. Cf. Th. Ritter von Oppolzer, *Canon der Finsternisse* (Vienna, 1887) [Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftliche Classe, 25], p. 353, and V. Grumel, *La Chronologie* (Traité des Etudes Byzantines, I: Paris, 1958), p. 461, cf. p. 458.

26. Pisides III, ll. 13–16.

27. Pisides III, ll. 3–6.

poetical way to show that what will be described in the following lines had occurred before the new moon (12 August).

The Byzantines are now in the plain, to the east of the Persians who occupy strong positions on mountains;²⁸ some skirmishes occur under a 'burning sun'²⁹ but the immobilization affects the morale of both armies.³⁰ Finally the decisive battle is fought, the Byzantines win a complete victory and conquer the Persian camp.

We now know that this battle was fought some days after 28 July and most probably before 12 August. I am wondering whether an allusion of Pisides, towards the end of his poem, is not an indication of the exact date of the battle. Addressing Christ, the poet invites him to help the emperor and to assimilate him to Elias and to Moses, who had the opportunity of speaking to him when he was on earth.³¹ It is obvious that Pisides has in mind the Transfiguration. And the question arises: is it a mere coincidence that the feast of the Transfiguration (6 August) falls inside the period in which the decisive battle between Byzantines and Persians must have been fought (28 July–12 August)? or is 6 August the exact date of the battle? Nothing is certain.³²

Little is said about what happened after the battle. There is no more question of the Persians, who seem to have left the Byzantine territory. The Byzantine cities (of Pontus, I presume) that suffered from the Persian blockade, are now free to receive provisions.³³ A menace in the west obliges Heraclius to return to Constantinople, while his army goes to its winter quarters 'in Armenia' (according to Theophanes).³⁴

Our information is too vague to permit establishing an accurate topography of the operations. As has already been

28. Pisides III, ll. 23–4, 27, 30.

29. Pisides III, l. 100: this is normal for the month of August.

30. This is obvious from the story of a Persian defector to the Byzantines, related by Pisides II, ll. 137–77.

31. Pisides III, ll. 385–425.

32. It has been pointed out (Pertusi, p. 161; cf. I. Dujčev in *BZ*, LVII (1964), 415) that the comparison of the emperor to Moses is a *topos* in Byzantine poetry and particularly in Pisides' poems. But this remark does not explain the mention of Elias in the present text.

33. Pisides III, ll. 300–1.

34. Pisides III, ll. 311–40; Theophanes, p. 306, ll. 7–8.

maintained,³⁵ I consider as very probable that Heraclius concentrated his troops near Caesarea, while the Persians were blocking the Pontic towns to the north. In any case, the first contact of the two armies (13 July) must also have occurred near the concentration point, not far from the Cilician Gates, since this pass was the alternate route chosen by Shahrbaraz after 19 July, and we have seen that the movement of the Persian army to and from the Gates had not taken more than eight days: Subsequent operations must have occurred to the north-east: the unsuccessful night attack by the Persians (28 July), skirmishes, and the decisive battle, fought before 12 August, which may be on 6 August. The Persians flee, the blockade of some Byzantine cities is raised and Heraclius' army goes to winter quarters.

This chronological sketch raises some general questions: the concentration and preparation of the Byzantine army in Asia Minor took more than three months, while the military operations lasted less than a month and ended easily with the first defeat of the Persians. A careful study of Pisides' poem shows that his pompous and grandiloquent style is often used concerning minor events. For example, Pisides relates at length how Heraclius got a bruise on his little toe while crossing to Asia Minor (this description takes 95 lines out of the 1,087 of the whole poem),³⁶ the army manoeuvres (129 lines),³⁷ the capture of an Arab (32 lines),³⁸ the repeated defections of a Persian who is not even described as a high official (41 lines).³⁹ Nowhere does he allude to the numerical importance of the armies, not even by the use of poetic adjectives; there is no question of reinforcements coming to the one or the other of the opponents. If one sums up the concrete information given by Pisides, one realizes that the poet describes events limited in scale and in importance. It seems that the campaign of 622 had not any significant results: and this explains why most of the other sources, including the contemporary Paschal Chronicle, simply ignore the whole campaign; and why Theophanes, who

35. See, e.g., Stratos, loc. cit., p. 138.

36. Pisides I, ll. 157–252.

37. Pisides II, ll. 76–205.

38. Pisides II, ll. 206–38.

39. Pisides III, ll. 137–77.

mentions it, depends wholly on Pisides for its description, while he has used other sources relating in detail preliminary events, the grouping and manœuvres of the Byzantine troops.

In other words, it seems to me that the main activity of Heraclius during the summer of 622 was to raise, train, and organize an army in Asia Minor. His clashes with the expeditionary corps of Shahrbaraz were of minor importance, except that the Byzantine victory obliged the Persians to raise their blockade of some Pontic cities. But these clashes constituted the first military victory of the Byzantines over the Persians in several years; moreover, they constituted personal successes of Heraclius. This explains why, in the euphoria of the victory, Pisides wrote and probably read his lengthy poem just after the emperor's return to Constantinople: it is a panegyric but also a piece of propaganda aimed at boosting the citizens' morale and establishing public confidence in the person of Heraclius.

One last remark: out of the whole description of the campaign, it becomes obvious that the greater part of Asia Minor, western, central and, partly, eastern, was in Byzantine hands during the years 621 and 622: Pisides states clearly that the imperial army was dispersed⁴⁰ and Heraclius grouped it on his way to the east by sending written orders.⁴¹ No cities had to be recaptured. The Persians, who had invaded Asia Minor several times in previous years,⁴² had obviously not tried to establish themselves in it: after each invasion, their main forces returned home,⁴³ though keeping some kind of control over the strategic passes (e.g. the Cilician Gates, which Shahrbaraz seemed to consider, according to Pisides, as a way open to him).

This general situation explains how Heraclius was able to organize a new army in Asia Minor, an army that together with his European troops will follow him in his long wars against Persia. It cannot be a coincidence that the 'themes' are for the first time mentioned by Theophanes in connection with the

40. Pisides II, l. 56.

41. Pisides II, ll. 38, 54.

42. E.g. in 607–8, invasion of Armenia, Cappadocia, Galatia, Paphlagonia down to Chalcedon; in 611, temporary occupation of Caesarea; in 615, the Persians arrive again at Chalcedon; in 619, they occupy Ancyra: see Pernice, loc. cit., pp. 57f. and *Pertusi*, pp. 136f.

43. Cf. Pernice, loc. cit., p. 63, n. 1.

raising of this very army in the summer of 622.⁴⁴ Having established, probably in advance, the recruiting system, Heraclius tried it in the summer of 622. The army was gathered and trained. This seems to have been the main Byzantine achievement of that year, followed by a limited military success over the Persians.

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44. Cf. *supra*, note 11.